

IX. PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT

Although the legislation authorizing JTPA did not mandate performance standards for Job Corps, over the years the National Office has developed perhaps the most comprehensive performance measurement system (PMS) of any education and training program. Performance standards have been an integral part of the Job Corps center accountability process for over 15 years. More recently, standards were formally incorporated into the procurement and assessment processes for placement contractors and for outreach and admissions (OA) contractors. As a result, Job Corps currently has a comprehensive accountability system that covers its three main program components. In this chapter, we describe PMS and its effects on operations.

We begin by providing some background information on the purpose of the Job Corps PMS and on its general features. We then describe the PMS that was in effect at the time the study was implemented, as well as any major recent modifications to it. We then discuss how this accountability system affects Job Corps program operations, using information obtained from the center mail survey and the site visits. We also discuss the intended and unintended consequences of a PMS system for students.

A. BACKGROUND

There is a long tradition in Job Corps of program accountability, and integral to this philosophy is the use of a PMS to create a performance-driven program that focuses the attention of Job Corps contractors on providing high-quality services to improve student outcomes. In the early 1980s, Job Corps established a PMS for center operators. Recognizing that successful outcomes could not be achieved unless students stayed in the program for a considerable period, the initial system included two measures related to length of stay (as a proxy for in-program outcomes that were not explicitly

measured) and an overall placement rate measure for students who stayed in the program at least six months. The system provided a report card that supported comparisons across centers and could be used in the center procurement process.

Over the years, performance standards have played a major role in determining whether Job Corps contractors are awarded option years on their contract. Job Corps awards contracts for center operations for a two-year base period, with three one-year options that the regional office may exercise. Although many factors enter this determination, high-performing contract centers that meet or exceed their standards are generally awarded option years, whereas low-performing center operators may be denied their option years, and the contract to operate the center may be ended. Currently, the center's report card carries 25 percent of the weight in a competitive procurement process. As a result, centers pay a great deal of attention to their performance and to factors that influence their ability to meet their standards. Moreover, there has historically been considerable competition among centers in a quest to achieve high overall rankings.

Over the past several years, the Job Corps center PMS has become very comprehensive. It currently includes both a student outcomes measurement system and a quality measurement system. The student outcome measurement system for program year (PY) 1998 includes nine measures, and the quality measurement system includes three additional measures and requires a complex formula for assessment of overall center performance.

In recognition of the interdependence of all Job Corps components, over the past few years, Job Corps has established a PMS for placement contractors and for OA agencies. Moreover, so that all the major components of the program were working together toward the same goals, the measures and standards selected for placement and OA contractors were designed to promote partnerships among all service providers. Beginning July 1, 1992, Job Corps introduced a PMS for placement

agencies. This system operated for two years on an informational basis only and, effective July 1, 1994, a set of measures and standards was formally incorporated into all new contract competitions and all active placement contracts. The PMS for OA agencies was initially implemented on an informational basis on July 1, 1994. Effective July 1, 1996, a set of measures and standards was incorporated into all new competitions for new OA contracts and in all active OA contracts. Also, beginning in July 1996, Job Corps changed the name of its accountability system from PMS to the Outcome Measurement System (OMS) to emphasize the focus on student outcomes. In the rest of this chapter, we refer to the PMS as the OMS.

Next, we provide additional information about the Job Corps OMS that was in effect at the time of the National Job Corps Study. Because the center OMS had been in effect for over a decade, our discussion focuses primarily on the center OMS and its effects on center operations. Although we briefly describe the OMS for placement contractors and OA agencies, the placement agency system was in its first effective year of operation when we interviewed placement managers, and the OA system had not been officially introduced at the time we interviewed OA counselors or OA managers. As a result, we were able to collect little information about the experiences of placement or OA staff with these systems.

B. PROGRAM YEAR 1994 OUTCOME MEASUREMENT SYSTEMS AND RECENT CHANGES

At the time eligible applicants were initially selected into the National Job Corps Study (November 1994), the PY 1994 OMS was in effect for Job Corps centers, and a system for placement agencies had just been formally introduced. Since then, Job Corps has continued to follow its annual practice of convening a work group to review (and revise as necessary) its accountability systems to ensure they are consistent with overall program goals. In this section, we

describe the center OMS that was in effect in PY 1994 and briefly indicate the types of changes that have been made to the center system in recent years. We also briefly describe the Job Corps OMS for placement contractors and OA agencies.

1. Program Year 1994 Center OMS

An OMS includes a set of measures, standards for each measure, and a method to aggregate performance across measures to create an overall assessment. In PY 1994, Job Corps organized its OMS into three areas: (1) in-program, (2) initial placement (based on outcomes measured within six months after termination), and (3) quality/compliance. As indicated in Table IX.1, the program area included four measures related to reading and math gains, GED attainment, and vocational completion. The placement area contained three measures, including an overall placement rate, as well as the average wage and a quality placement indicator primarily based on whether students are placed in a training-related job. The quality/compliance area was new in PY 1994 and combined an average-length-of-stay (ALOS) measure, which had always been included in the OMS in prior years in some way, and a quality/compliance rating based on an in-depth review of the center by regional office staff.

As the exhibit indicates, many of the measures included in the PY 1994 OMS were based on subsets of Job Corps students who met certain criteria. The specific measures and the pools of students used for each measure are developed by the National Office, in conjunction with a work group composed primarily of representatives of the various components of the Job Corps community. Every year, Job Corps forms a technical work group to review the accountability system for assessing contractor performance and to discuss issues that have been identified, in order to make any necessary changes to focus all contractors on quality outcomes for students. The PY 1994 pools

TABLE IX.1

PROGRAM YEAR 1994 JOB CORPS CENTER OUTCOME MEASUREMENT SYSTEM

Area/Measure	Pool of Students	Performance	Standard
Program			
Reading Gains	Scored less than 8.5 on TABE 5/6 reading test (or did not take test)	Percentage students in pool who gain two grades or score 8.5 on follow-up TABE reading test	30 percent
Math Gains	Scored less than 8.5 on TABE 5/6 math test (or did not take test)	Percentage students in pool who gain two grades or score 8.5 on follow-up TABE math test	33 percent
GED Rate	Without high school degree and scored 6.3 or above on TABE 5/6 reading test	Percentage students in pool who obtain GED/high school degree, including bonus for students who initially score low on test	Model-Based
Vocational Completion Rate	Stayed at least 60 days and participated in a vocational program with an approved training achievement record (TAR)	Percentage students in pool who complete vocation at completer or advanced completer level	56 percent
Placement			
Placement Rate	Students with a placement record and those with a record that was due but not received	Percentage students in pool placed in job/military or school, with bonus for AT/ACT transfers	69 percent
Average Wage	Students placed in a job/military	Average wage	Model-Based
Quality Placement Rate	Vocational completers with a placement record and those with a record that was due but not received	Percentage placed in a job training match, with bonus for students placed in college or AT/ACT transfers	51 percent
Quality/Compliance			
Length of Stay	All students	Average paid days, including bonus for AT/ACT transfers	236 days
ARPA Rating	—	Regional office rating of center quality/compliance	100

for reading and math gains were focused on students who initially scored low (less than 8.5 grade level) on the Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE); the GED pool focused on students who scored high (grade level of 6.3 or above) and within academic striking distance of obtaining a GED while in the program; the vocational completion rate pool focused on students who stayed at least 60 days and enrolled in a trade for which a training achievement record (TAR) had been developed to assess completion; and the quality placement rate pool was restricted to students who completed a vocation, a subgroup for whom a quality placement was expected.

The third column of Table IX.1 describes how performance was calculated for each measure. As indicated, “bonuses” were included in the calculations of PY 1994 center performance for three measures in order to provide centers with appropriate incentives/rewards. For example, the formula used to calculate the GED rate included a bonus for centers who work with students who score too low on the TABE test to be included in the pool to get a GED;¹ the placement rate included an automatic placement for students who transferred to a Job Corps advanced training (AT) or an advanced career training (ACT) program;² and the quality placement measure for PY 1994 included bonuses for students who were placed in college programs, as well as transfers to AT or ACT programs.³ Job Corps has had a long history of providing performance incentives to centers to

¹Specifically, the center GED attainment rate can be expressed as $(A+B)/(C+B)$, where A represents the number of students in the pool who achieve a GED or high school diploma; B is the number of students who score too low on the initial TABE test to be included in the pool but who achieve a GED or high school diploma while in Job Corps; and C is the number of students in the pool. Adding B to both the numerator and the denominator results in a bonus in that the calculated GED attainment rate is greater than the rate for the eligible pool (that is, greater than A/C). The bonus can be particularly large for small centers.

²The formula for the placement rate bonus is conceptually the same as for the GED rate, except that in this case A represents the number of students in the pool who were placed, B represents the number of AT/ACT transfers, and C represents all students in the placement pool.

³The formula for the quality placement rate added both the number of college placements and
(continued...)

transfer students to AT programs to ensure these programs operate at full capacity. However, from PY 1994 to PY 1997, Job Corps removed many of the bonuses from the system because it was felt that they were not needed to encourage transfers to AT centers and because they distorted measures of performance, especially for small centers, and centers in regions with a greater availability of AT programs. However, in PY 1998, strong performance incentives have been reinstituted in the OMS to encourage student transfers to AT programs.

The final column shows the standards that were in effect in PY 1994 for each measure. Two primary issues are involved in setting standards: (1) the type of standard chosen, and (2) the specific level of the standard. Job Corps has traditionally used two different types of standards: (1) national numerical standards that are the same for all centers; and (2) model-based standards, which are adjusted individually to account for other factors that are beyond the control of the center. As this table indicates, during PY 1994, Job Corps used national numerical standards for seven of the nine measures but used model-based standards to adjust for differences in factors (such as student characteristics, local labor market conditions, GED state passing-score requirements) that affect the GED attainment rate and the average wage measure.⁴

The other aspect of setting standards concerns the specific level chosen for each measure. Because a key purpose of the center OMS has traditionally been to identify high-performing centers, standards have historically been set at a high level. The guiding philosophy has been that of a “bell curve,” where standards have been set for a particular year based on historical data such that if measured performance did not change in the following year, then 25 percent of the centers would

³(...continued)
AT/ACT transfers to both the numerator and denominator of the basic rate for the eligible pool.

⁴In recent years, Job Corps has increased to use of model-based standards to ensure equity in comparing center performance. Specifically, of the nine measures in the PY 1997 and PY 1998 systems, four of the measures use model-based standards.

exceed the high end of the range of their standards, 50 percent would fall between the low and high end of their standards, and 25 percent would fall short of the low end of their standards on a specific measure.⁵ Although the underlying principle of establishing standards has been a bell curve, policy considerations have sometimes resulted in standards that have been set at very high levels to focus attention on specific measures. At other times, standards for specific measures have been set at lower than the bell curve would dictate, because that level was either considered to be too high or would be perceived by centers as involving an excessive (and potentially unfair) change from the prior year. During the period immediately before the National Study, the main departure from the bell curve approach occurred in the placement area, where, to focus attention on improved performance, Job Corps established a higher target standard than historical data would have indicated for the initial placement rate.

In PY 1994, Job Corps made a policy decision to change the way it assessed center performance on each measure and overall. In previous years, a center's performance on each measure was judged in terms of whether it exceeded the high end of the standard (high performer), fell between the low and high end of the standard (medium performer), or fell short of the low point of the standard low performer. A set of rules were then applied, based on combinations of adjectival (high, medium, low) ratings of performance on individual measures, to aggregate across measures and reach an overall assessment. Under the rating system that began in PY 1994, a center's assessment on a particular measure was determined by comparison of actual performance to the standard on a percentage scale, where the standard was set at the highest point of the medium range of performance. Thus, centers that exactly met their standard achieved a rating of 100 percent on that measure, centers that exceeded their standard achieved a rating of over 100 percent, and centers that

⁵Although a 25-50-25 rule was used to establish standards for many years, in PY 1997 Job Corps instituted a 30-40-30 rule to identify low-performing centers more effectively.

fell short of their standard achieved a rating of less than 100 percent. Within each of the three areas--in-program, placement and quality/compliance--performance was measured as the average of the percentage ratings of each measure. Since each of the three areas was given equal weight of one-third, the overall center rating was determined as a simple average of the three ratings.

The change from an adjectival summary rating system--high, medium, low--to a percentage scale in PY 1994 represented an important policy decision. Job Corps recognized that an adjectival rating system encouraged centers not to maximize student outcomes, but to try to move from low to medium or from medium to high. In contrast, a percentage scale improved calculated center performance for every student who achieved the specific measure, even if the center was already above the 100 percent level. The shift to an overall percentage scale rating system also allowed centers to take advantage of very high measured performance in a specific area and potentially compensate for lower performance in another area. Together, these changes gave centers new avenues to increase their overall measured performance and relative ranking and resulted in even more center focus on the OMS.

2. Placement Agency OMS

Although a performance standards system was initially introduced to placement agencies for informational purposes in PY 1992 and PY 1993, the system officially became effective beginning with PY 1994. Through the placement outcome measurement system (POMS), placement agencies are held accountable for students who terminate from a center and who are assigned to them for placement services. At the time of the National Study, placement assistance was available to

students for up to six months after termination but stopped with the initial placement, even if a student was placed soon after leaving Job Corps.⁶

As indicated in the top panel of Table IX.2, three measures were used to assess placement agency performance in PY 1994, measures very similar to those included in the placement area for center OMS. Specifically, the three measures included in the PY 1994 OMS for placement agencies were (1) the placement rate, (2) average wage, and (3) the job-training match rate among vocational completers. As such, the system included a quantity indicator (the placement rate) and two indicators of placement quality. The primary difference between the center OMS measures and the POMS measures lay in the job-training match measure, where centers were credited for college placements and transfers to advanced programs and where placement agencies were assessed exclusively on job-training matches. Such differences were the cause of some confusion and generated concern about whether a consistent message was being sent to all major components of the program. Since that time, modifications have been made to align the POMS even more closely for placement contractors with the OMS for centers.

Consistent with the Job Corps philosophy of focusing all contractors on common goals, the POMS was quite similar to the OMS during PY 1994. For example, standards were set with the same methods, and the level of the standards was identical. A percentage scale was introduced to assess agencies on performance relative to their standard on each measure. The overall assessment was computed with the placement rate measure given a weight of 60 percent and the other two quality measures given equal weights of 20 percent. The high weight applied to the placement rate

⁶More recently, policy changes have required expanded placement assistance throughout the six-month post-termination eligibility period.

TABLE IX.2

**JOB CORPS PLACEMENT OUTCOME MEASUREMENT SYSTEM (POMS) AND OUTREACH
AND ADMISSIONS OUTCOME MEASUREMENT SYSTEM (OAOMS)**

Area/Measure	Pool of Students	Performance	Standard
PY 1994 POMS			
Placement Rate	Students assigned to agency with placement record received or record due but not received	Percentage of students in pool placed in a job/military or school	69 percent
Average Wage	Students assigned to agency who were placed in a job/military	Average wage	Model-Based
Job Training Match Rate	Vocational completers assigned to agency with a placement record received or record due but not received	Percentage of of students in pool placed in a job that matches area of vocational training	51 percent
PY 1996 OAOMS			
Total Arrival Rate	Total (male plus female) quota for arrivals	Total number of arrivals divided by total quota	100 percent
30-Day Stay Rate	All students	Percentage who stay at least 30 paid days	90 percent

reflected the particularly strong program and policy focus at the time on getting students initially placed in a job or a schooling program that would better prepare them for the workplace.

3. Outreach and Admissions OMS

In PY 1995, the National Office introduced performance standards to OA contractors for information purposes. In PY 1996, Job Corps officially incorporated standards into procurement for new OA contracts and all existing contracts. The measures used directly reflect Job Corps' key goals of having centers operate at full capacity, serving eligible youth who are committed to the program. Specifically, as indicated in the second panel of Table IX.2, the OA quantity measure captured the extent to which the OA contractor meets the total quota of arrivals specified in their contract. Specifically, this measure combines quotas for males and females and divides the sum of recruited male and female students that arrive on center by their total quota, with a national standard of 100 percent. As such, this allows agencies that recruit both males and females to offset shortfalls for one gender with additional recruits of another. The quality measure determines the percentage of all arrivals who stay in Job Corps at least 30 paid days, with a national standard for this measure of 90 percent. The overall performance of an OA contractor has been determined with a percentage scale with the quantity measure given 60 percent of the weight and the quality measure 40 percent.

4. Recent Changes in Outcome Measurement Systems

In the past few years, partly as a result of major policy decisions, and partly through the normal process of annually reviewing the measurement systems, Job Corps has made a number of changes to the key program policies and to center and placement performance standards systems. These changes could affect student outcomes and the generalizability of the study findings. Perhaps the most important changes are those that occurred during the middle of the enrollment for the impact

study. Specifically, in March 1995, a key change involved the expansion of the policy of zero tolerance for violence and drugs, partly in response to Senate Oversight Hearings that focused on perceived increased levels of violence on centers. The change also reflected a strong commitment to ensuring that students are able to participate in the Job Corps program without being subjected to violence or the threats of violence. Specifically, Job Corps implemented a zero-tolerance policy with a “one-strike-and-you’re-out” provision for the most serious violent or criminal offenses, as well as for drug violations. At that same time, because of concerns that, to obtain high measured performance on the ALOS measure, centers were keeping some students who were disruptive and exhibiting violent behavior, in March 1995, the National Office decided to remove this measure from the center OMS retroactive to the beginning of PY 1994 and committed to developing a new OMS measure for PY 1995 to assess student safety. Moreover, to hold centers blameless for terminating students who violated the expanded zero-tolerance policy within the first 30 days on center, all such students are eliminated from the pools for all center OMS measures. OA agencies, however, continue to be held accountable for such students.

Over the past four years, several other noteworthy changes have been made to the OMS and the POMS. Briefly, the types of changes that Job Corps has made to its performance measurement systems since the beginning of the National Study include:

- More comprehensive OMS and POMS, with an expansion in OMS to nine measures and an expansion in POMS to five measures
- Greater focus on quality outcomes and longer-term outcomes in both the OMS and the POMS, with the addition of a full-time placement rate measure and the introduction of the first post-placement measure based on data 13 weeks after the initial placement
- Inclusion in the OMS of measures that focus attention on student safety and on operating centers at full capacity

- Broadening of the pools used for defining measures to focus centers and placement agencies on the outcomes obtained by all students served
- Greater comparability of the performance measurement systems for the three major components

C. EFFECTS OF PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT SYSTEMS

Because of the key role performance standards play in the procurement process, contractors involved in OA, center operations, and placement have focused their attention increasingly on ways to improve measured performance. As a consequence, performance standards directly affect contractor and staff behavior, in both intended and unintended ways. The focus on measured performance, in combination with enrichment of the Job Corps curriculum, has resulted in considerable improvements in measured outcomes over the last decade. In this section we describe our findings concerning the intended and unintended effects of Job Corps' performance standards systems on program operations and student outcomes. Because the Outreach and Admissions and Placement systems were too new to have affected program operations significantly in these areas at the time of the study, we focus next on the effects of OMS on center operations. These findings are based primarily on data obtained from the center mail survey, as well as staff interviews and focus group discussions during the site visits.

In assessing the effects of the center OMS on Job Corps operations, we examine several different issues, including (1) staff knowledge/involvement with center standards and actual performance against those standards, (2) use of parallel management information systems to track performance, (3) use of incentive payments tied to performance on OMS, (4) use of OMS data to make management decisions, and (5) effects on operations related to specific performance measures.

Finally, we also briefly summarize the effects of the Job Corps performance assessment systems on the types of contractors that are operating the Job Corps program.

1. Staff Knowledge/Involvement

Center staff are quite aware of the standards that are set for the center, as well as the center's performance against those standards. All 110 centers that responded to the mail survey indicated that staff are generally aware of the OMS standards and of the center's performance against the standards. All the centers indicated that they provide OMS information to management staff, and nearly all indicated that they provide OMS information to academic instructors and vocational instructors. Roughly 3 to 5 percent of the centers indicated that they did not provide information from the OMS to counselors or residential living staff. Information from the staff focus groups confirmed these perceptions, as nearly all the focus groups that discussed this issue indicated that staff had regular access to OMS statistics and that the information was routinely circulated or discussed in staff meetings. Only one focus group meeting indicated that OMS information was not usually shared with center line staff.

In Table IX.3, we present information from the center mail survey on the frequency with which centers provide OMS data to management staff and line staff, as well as information on the provision of OMS data to students. As this table indicates, centers provide OMS information to management staff on a much more frequent basis than to other center staff. Overall, 67.3 percent of the centers reported providing OMS information to management staff on a weekly basis, as compared to 38.2 percent for other staff.⁷ Virtually all other centers reported providing this information to staff on a

⁷Although not reported in the table, there are large differences by region in the frequency of providing OMS information to staff, with all centers in Regions 1 and 7/8 reporting they provide OMS data to management staff on a weekly basis, as compared to Regions 2 and 10, where only about 55 to 60 percent of the centers reported doing so.

TABLE IX.3

PROVISION OF OMS INFORMATION TO STAFF AND STUDENTS
(Percentage of Centers That Provide OMS Information to Staff/Students, by Center Type)

	Center Type			
	Overall	CCC	Primarily Residential	Significantly Nonresidential
Weekly to Management Staff	67	37	80	77
Monthly to Management Staff	33	63	20	23
Weekly to Other Center Staff	38	20	44	46
Monthly to Other Center Staff	60	80	56	46
Whether Provide to Students	68	63	70	69

SOURCE: National Job Corps Study Center Mail Survey.

monthly basis. Contract centers are also much more likely to provide OMS information on a weekly basis to both management staff and line staff. These differences likely reflect the more important role that the PMS plays in the procurement process for contract centers. About two-thirds (68.2 percent) of the centers reported that they provided information from OMS to their students, with contract centers again slightly more likely than CCCs to report providing this information to students.

2. Use of Parallel Management Information Systems

OMS information and formal monthly reports are provided to centers through SPAMIS. To be able to verify the accuracy of the SPAMIS reports and to obtain additional information on center performance, many centers maintain their own parallel management information systems that are integrated with SPAMIS. Specifically, based on our site visits, we found that about three-fourths of the centers maintain a parallel system, and this rate is considerably higher for contract centers than for CCCs. These systems are generally centrally supported and managed by the corporation that holds the center contract. According to center staff, these systems contain a much broader range of pre-termination student data than SPAMIS, offer greater flexibility for customizing reports, and are more user-friendly and timely.

A key use of these parallel MIS systems involves tracking performance against center standards as measured in the OMS. First, corporate headquarters use the systems to monitor the performance of the centers under their management umbrella and to identify trends or potential problems in performance before the OMS reports are available. Second, centers routinely use data from their own MIS system to plan and allocate resources and to troubleshoot problems. Because the OMS reports are available only at the center level, many centers indicated they needed other information at a lower level of aggregation to understand overall performance better. As a result, many centers use their parallel MIS systems to track performance by vocation, by dorm, and even by individual

instructor. This helps centers identify strengths and weaknesses. Finally, centers also use their in-house MIS systems to track data that they find useful but that are no longer included in the OMS. Specifically, several centers mentioned that they continue to track average length of stay, even though it is no longer included as a measure in the OMS.

3. Use of Incentive Payments

Job Corps uses incentive payments that are tied to measured center performance as a method to focus center staff attention on OMS. As indicated in Table IX.4, the data from the center mail survey incentive payments that are tied to OMS performance are used as incentives for management and other center staff in 61 percent of the centers. In addition, about half the centers reported that other staff were eligible for incentive payments or bonuses depending on center performance as measured in the OMS. Contract centers are much more likely than CCCs to use incentive payments tied to OMS performance for center directors and for other staff. There are fairly large differences among regions in the use of incentive payments tied to OMS performance (Appendix Table B.28). For example, at the time of the National Study, all center directors in contract centers in Regions 3 and 10 were eligible for incentive payments or bonuses based on measured OMS performance, as compared to only half the centers in Region 6 and two-thirds of those in Region 5.

Table IX.4 also indicates that centers routinely use measured OMS performance as a factor in performance appraisals of individual center staff. Specifically, 86 percent of the centers reported that OMS performance is used as a factor in the performance appraisals of individual center staff, and this is quite similar across center types. This finding is consistent with data from the site visits that indicated that many centers tie incentive payments and merit pay increases to center performance measures.

TABLE IX.4

STAFF INCENTIVES OR BONUSES
 (Percentage of Centers That Use Incentives/Bonuses Based on OMS Performance)

	Center Type			
	Overall	CCC	Primarily Residential	Significantly Nonresidential
Center Director Eligible for Incentive/Bonus Based on OMS Performance	61	10	82	77
Staff Eligible for Incentive/Bonus Based on OMS Performance	51	17	69	54
OMS Performance Used in Staff Appraisals	86	83	87	89

SOURCE: National Job Corps Study Center Mail Survey.

4. Use of OMS Data

The results from the mail survey and the site visits strongly indicate that many centers were in the process of creating, or had already created, a performance-focused culture. This is quite consistent with the results in the first column of Table IX.5, which indicate that the large majority of centers (89 percent) regularly use OMS information to make management decisions. This is also consistent with the information obtained during the site visits, which indicated overwhelmingly that center directors and other management staff regarded OMS data to be essential to good management. Only one center director we talked with during the site visits did not consider OMS data to be central to decision-making at the center. The pattern of using OMS information to make management decisions is widespread across CCCs and contract centers. Although not reported, there seems to be a tendency for contract centers in the western regions (Regions 9 and 10) to be less likely to use OMS information in making management decisions.⁸ The pattern of centers in Regions 9 and 10 being less likely to use OMS information to make management decisions is interesting, as centers in these two regions have historically been rated higher on OMS than those centers in other regions.

The mail survey also collected information concerning centers' practices in making decisions about whether to keep or terminate specific students and the role that OMS plays in the process. Approximately one-third (32.7 percent) of all centers reported that in making decisions about whether to terminate a particular student, they take into account the effect that decision will have on their OMS statistics. As shown in the second row of Table IX.5, there are no differences in this practice between CCCs and contract centers overall, but contract centers that have a significant nonresidential population are much more likely than primarily residential centers to follow this

⁸See Appendix Table B.29.

TABLE IX.5

USE OF OMS INFORMATION IN CENTER DECISIONS
(Percentage of Centers That Use OMS Information as Input to Various Decisions)

	Center Type			
	Overall	CCC	Primarily Residential	Significantly Nonresidential
Use of OMS Data for Management Decisions	89	87	89	92
Use of OMS Data in Student Retention Decisions	33	33	26	46

SOURCE: National Job Corps Study Center Mail Survey.

practice. Although not reported in the table, it appears that this practice is much more common in Regions 5 and 6 than in other regions.⁹

Information obtained from the site visits reinforced the impression of a performance-driven culture reflected in these mail survey results. For example, many centers hold regular (usually weekly) meetings of management staff to discuss which students should be put in the exit phase of the program, as well as when certain students already in the exit phase should be terminated. During the site visits, project staff were able to observe such meetings. Consistent with the picture from the mail survey, extensive staff resources are usually devoted to these meetings. The meetings we observed typically included a total of 5 to 10 management staff and staff members from multiple areas (such as academic, vocational, residential living), who met for a couple of hours each week to discuss what to do with students who were considered for termination. The discussion during these meetings took into account a wide range of factors, including how far along the student was in his or her program, how much additional effort and time were required to complete certain activities and the student's behavior and how it affected the center environment and other students. The discussion also typically included a review of the student's credits on each of the OMS measures and the result of terminating the student on the center's OMS statistics. As such, the impact on the center's measured performance is clearly one of several factors taken into account in making termination decisions, and depending on the other factors, could be the deciding factor for many students.

These practices are also consistent with information obtained in the staff focus groups indicating that management emphasis on performance statistics had increased the pressure and stress of their jobs and affected decisions on student retention. For example, some of the larger contractors have reinforced the performance outcome orientation through their own management practices.

⁹See Appendix Table B.29.

Specifically, some have established for their centers performance goals that are higher (for example, 5 percent higher) than the OMS standards set by the National Office. Moreover, one of the focus groups mentioned that to increase measured performance, staff actively tried to persuade students who were contemplating quitting to change their minds, with the underlying intent to increase center measured performance. Also, during two focus group meetings, staff indicated that to maximize OMS statistics, centers implemented the zero-tolerance policy unevenly. Specifically, it was reported that centers were less likely to terminate better-performing students for a zero-tolerance violation than other students who were not likely to obtain subsequent OMS credits.

5. Operational Impacts Related to Specific Measures

As the above discussion indicates, centers devote considerable time, energy, and other resources to managing their measured performance as reported in the OMS. Although some of the staff we talked with perceived that too great an emphasis was placed on “numbers” as opposed to “quality services for students,” this view was held by a minority of the center management staff we interviewed. Some of the effects of the OMS on center behavior, such as the general focus on improving student outcomes, is clearly intentional. Other effects of the OMS on center behavior are unintended. Below we briefly highlight some of the intended and unintended consequences of the OMS on Job Corps center operations related to specific performance measures.

- ***Despite removing the ALOS standard from the OMS in PY 1996 to reduce the incentive to “warehouse” students, many centers continue to track length of stay and use it as a diagnostic tool to gauge OMS performance.*** Some center staff applauded the decision to remove the ALOS measure from OMS, because they felt it encouraged unproductive warehousing of students to meet specific standards. In contrast, others viewed it as detrimental because it resulted in excessive emphasis on moving the student along in the program and put more pressure on placement outcomes. Many centers continue to track ALOS internally, because they consider it to be a useful monitoring tool, although they no longer use it in deciding when to terminate students.

- The basic-skills attainment standards in reading and math that focus on literacy and numeracy have resulted in the introduction of enrichment classes to help students, as well as extra efforts to test students.*** As described in Chapter V, about half the centers have developed Maximizing Academic Potential (MAP) classes, smaller classes for students with low initial academic abilities to help them meet the basic-skills standards. It is unlikely that these special enrichment classes or other special tutoring programs would have been introduced in the absence of center standards related to literacy and numeracy. The other impact of the academic standards on center operations concerns the emphasis placed on ensuring that students receive initial and follow-up tests. Although the focus on testing all students initially is quite appropriate, this has resulted in considerable efforts to administer tests at every chance (for example, when students leave shortly after their last test or significantly after completing academics), and this multiple retesting raises issues related to the validity of the tests.
- There are concerns that the vocational completion standard has encouraged staff to “check off TARs” and emphasize lower completion levels in order to improve measured performance.*** The credibility and validity of the vocational completion rate measure has been questioned extensively by the National Office and the work groups used to develop the OMS. These concerns were also raised during our site visits. The main criticisms are that there is no independent assessment tool available to judge whether a student has completed a vocational program and that the standard has put considerable pressure on centers and instructors to indicate that a student has completed a trade by “checking off” the appropriate skills on the TARs, without the student having demonstrated each of the skills. There is also some concern that centers set the sights of some students too low by encouraging them to complete an “early step-off” level in a trade (such as sandwich maker, gas station attendant) to ensure they count as a vocational completer against the standard, but recognizing that students who terminate at this level have traditionally achieved lower placement outcomes.
- The high standards established for the placement rate measure successfully focused centers and placement agencies on improving measured initial placement outcomes, some of which occurred through increasing center staff resources to track students and increase the reporting of placements to ensure that centers receive the credit.*** Historically, centers have been reluctant to embrace the placement rate measure as a center standard, because they view the placement activity as beyond their control. However, placement rates have been included as a center measure since inception, because the academic, vocational, and residential living services provided on center are critical to students’ abilities to find jobs on their own. Although Job Corps students are very mobile and difficult to locate, primary responsibility for contacting them and providing placement services rests with placement agencies. However, centers have not fully trusted the data on placement outcomes provided by placement agencies and as a result spend additional staff resources to conduct follow-up activities to ensure they receive appropriate OMS credits. Although these efforts have resulted in more complete student outcome data, because these staff resources generally result not in improved outcomes for students but only in the recording of the placement results, it would be better to have the placement contractors locate the students and to have center staff focus on services to students.

- *Although the job-training match rate is conceptually a good measure, the crosswalk used to determine matches between training and the occupation of the job could be manipulated and, since centers have difficulty changing the vocational programs they offer, it is difficult for them to respond to changes in labor market conditions and influence this measure.* The underlying notion of providing training to students for jobs that are available and then placing them in jobs that match their skills is fundamentally sound. However, the crosswalk used to determine a job-training match is based on whether the Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) codes of the training recorded initially as a DOT code by centers match the CIP code of the job based on the DOT code recorded by the placement agency. Because DOT codes can be assigned to multiple CIP codes, and because it is in the interest of both centers and placement agencies to record underlying codes that can be matched to maximize performance on this measure, this process may overstate the true job-training match rate. The other potential issue with this measure is that, since centers face considerable difficulties in changing vocational offerings, they are unable to respond to changes in local labor market conditions and provide training in areas that could appropriately increase the job-training match rate.

6. Changes in Contractors

Finally, as described in other chapters, the focus on measured performance has also been responsible for recent shifts in the Job Corps contractor landscape. For example, because of concerns regarding performance and responsiveness, use of SESAs as either OA or placement contractors has declined substantially. As recently as a decade ago, SESAs were the major providers of OA&P services; by the time of the National Study, these providers accounted for only about 15 percent of all students served by OA&P contractors. Correspondingly, the performance-driven system has resulted in an enormous growth of private, for-profit contractors for providing OA&P services, with especially strong growth in the use of center contractors to provide fully integrated services to the students they serve.

The performance report card has also been significant in the center procurement process. In recent years, a greater number of centers have been reassessed, and those in which the incumbent has had low performance have been awarded to new contractors. Finally, it is especially significant

that concerns over poor performance ratings recently caused Job Corps for the first time in over 30 years to close one CCC center and reassign another to a private contractor.

D. SUMMARY

As described above, the National Office has a comprehensive OMS for center operators, OA contractors, and placement agencies, a system that focuses these three major components on similar key program objectives. A detailed system was in effect for centers in PY 1994 at the time we began enrolling applicants into the National Job Corps Study. A number of improvements have been made to the OMS for centers over the past few years to focus on student outcomes, and the overall Job Corps accountability systems have expanded to include OA&P contractors.

Our results indicate that the center OMS is a powerful management tool that has resulted in a performance-driven program. This has produced a number of positive outcomes for the program, including attention to student safety issues, new programs to improve basic skills, a new emphasis on services and skills to support post-program attachment to the labor force, and (along with other program enhancements) increases in measured center performance over time. The OMS has also created staff financial incentives tied to contractor performance, as well as placed considerable pressure on staff at all levels in the program to improve measured performance. This has in turn resulted in both intended and unintended consequences. Finally, to the extent that the OMS drives contractor behavior, the changes in the system over the past few years (and over the next few years) must be assessed for full understanding of the generalizability of the forthcoming findings of the impact study.